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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/07/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KDEM NI

SUBJECT: JOURNALISTS IN NIGERIA: A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS

Classified By: Political Counselor Russell Hanks for Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. During the last two weeks a series of unfortunate events have struck journalists in Nigeria. On the evening of December 22, 2006, ThisDay newspaper's editorial board chairman Godwin Agbroko was shot and killed in Lagos. On December 24, 2006, Alhaji Bello Damagum of the Daily Trust newspaper was arrested by agents of the State Security Service (SSS) and held for 11 days without charge or contact with his family. In the early morning hours of January 6, 2007, a fire gutted the corporate offices of ThisDay Newspapers. Septel will report on two additional incidents the week of January 8. No suspects have been announced in any of the cases. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) On the evening of Friday, December 22, ThisDay editorial board chairman Godwin Agbroko was shot and killed in Lagos after leaving work. He remained late that evening, having finished his work by 6:30 PM, because publisher Nduka Ogbagbena called and requested that the staff remain until 9:00 PM for a meeting. When the publisher had not arrived by 9:30 PM, Agbroko departed the office; he was shot in the neck while driving home. Media reports indicate that his car was undamaged and valuables were left inside the vehicle after the shooter or shooters left the scene. ThisDay's Sunday editor, Olusegun Abe Adeniyi, told PolOff on January 8 that police were investigating but had not yet uncovered any leads. Ijeoma Nwogwugwu, head of the Abuja office of ThisDay, said the same thing. She said she thought the death was suspicious, but she was unwilling to say that foul play was involved.

¶3. (U) On December 24, Alhaji Bello Damagum of the Daily Trust was arrested by SSS agents and held incommunicado for 11 days. He was released on January 4, but was required to return to SSS offices on January 9 for further questioning. No charges have been filed, and he publicly claimed that he was never given an explanation for his detention. In a previous incident, Damagum had been arrested on June 21, 2004 in an incident involving sending students to Mauritania for Muslim religious studies.

¶4. (C) In the early morning hours of January 6 a fire gutted the corporate offices of ThisDay Newspaper in Lagos. No one was killed or injured in the incident, although a great deal of valuable equipment and records were lost. Olusegun Adeniyi told PolOff that police were investigating and had not yet discovered a cause of the fire. Adeniyi speculated that the fire was caused by a spark from some manner of wiring fault. He did not indicate that he suspected foul

play to PolOff. Nwogwugwu made a similar statement.

¶5. (C) COMMENT. At least three reasonable explanations present themselves for these incidents. The first is that journalists in Nigeria have simply had a string of incredibly bad luck, and the second is that the journalists have been specifically targeted but for reasons which have nothing to do with their responsibilities as journalists. The third possibility, however, is less pleasant. As Nigeria prepares for elections scheduled for April, it is possible that someone is trying to influence the political scene by intimidating journalists. During the week of January 8, unconfirmed reports say that two additional journalists have been arrested. Post will report septel on these two latest incidents and continue to monitor incidents surrounding journalists. END COMMENT.

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